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Animating and Sustaining Niche Social Networks

Abstract

Within the communicative space online Social Network Sites (SNS) afford, Niche Social Networks Sites (NSNS) have emerged around particular geographic, demographic or topic-based communities to provide what broader SNS do not: specified and targeted content for an engaged and interested community.

Drawing on a research project developed at the Queensland University of Technology in conjunction with the Australian Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre that produced an NSNS based around Adventure Travel, this paper outlines the main drivers for community creation and sustainability within NSNS. The paper asks what factors motivate users to join and stay with these sites and what, if any, common patterns can be noted in their formation. It also outlines the main barriers to online participation and content creation in NSNS, and the similarities and differences in SNS and NSNS business models.

Having built a community of 100 registered members, the staywild.com.au project was a living laboratory, enabling us to document the steps taken in producing a NSNS and cultivating and retaining active contributors. The paper incorporates observational analysis of user-generated content (UGC) and user profile submissions, statistical analysis of site usage, and findings from a survey of our membership pool in noting areas of success and of failure. In drawing on our project in this way we provide a template for future iterations of NSNS initiation and development across various other social settings: not only niche communities, but also the media and advertising with which they engage and interact.

Positioned within the context of online user participation and UGC research, our paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the tools afforded by NSNS extend earlier understandings of online ‘communities of interest’. It also outlines the relevance of our research to larger questions about the diversity of the social media ecology.

Animating and Sustaining Niche Social Networks

Niche social networks defined

Within the communicative space online Social Network Sites (SNS) afford, Niche Social Network Sites (NSNS) have emerged around particular geographic, demographic or topic-based communities to provide what broader SNS do not: specified and targeted content for an engaged and interested community. Where the SNS field is presently dominated one major SNS (Facebook), with a number of smaller rivals, past and present (MySpace, Bebo, Google+ etc), there are many NSNS. These range from parenting sites such as Essential Kids (owned by Fairfax) to travel sites such as Where Are You Now, to brand communities such as the myriad of Nike sports communities.

By definition, NSNS share common attributes with broader SNS. Boyd and Ellison (2008) define SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. SNS such as Facebook, Google+ or MySpace enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks, and, while connections may be made between individuals that may not otherwise have been made outside of the SNS, participants are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended network (2008, p.14). The overall strength of SNS is often seen in their reflection of Metcalfe's law, which states that the usefulness of a network (the value it provides in terms of facilitating communication) increases in proportion to the square number of nodes (or people) attached to it. In Metcalfe's law, a network of twenty people is not just twice as useful as a network of ten: it is four times as useful. NSNS disrupt this notion, suggesting that it is not the overall size of the network that matters, but the way people organise themselves into niches and exchange relevant and useful information within and among those niches. Ultimately, NSNS mean that smaller numbers of people are exchanging information, but that information is more valuable to that community. In other words, where the extrinsic value of SNS is mostly based on their potential for continued growth, NSNS are identity-driven affiliation sites that explicitly seek more narrowly focused audiences and are therefore limited in scope by their select demographic.

Writing at a time prior to the extraordinary growth of SNS, Rheingold (1993) developed a limited definition of online community as a social relationship aggregation, facilitated by internet-based technology, in which users communicate and build personal relationships (Rheingold, 1993). Subsequent scholarship has recognized that the boundaries of on and offline community are more complex and porous. Relevant to this study of NSNS, Hagel and Armstrong (1997) divided niche online communities into three main categories – geographic based, demographic based and topical based. Geographic communities focus on specific physical locations and places in which all the community's participants have a common interest because they are physically located there, have historical ties to the location or a desire to spend time there. Demographic online communities are more focused on topics such

as life stage, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic heritage. And topical communities focus on special interests or hobbies (Hagel & Armstrong 1997, 119). Preece (2007 in Beck) outlines four key characteristics that typically underpin successful online communities: people, purpose, policies, and computer systems. These people will tend to be bound by a particular purpose – “an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community” (2007, 6). To provide structure for the community, there also must be certain rules and policies in place governing how the community operates and how interactions between members occur. Finally, “the underlying software or user-interface of an online community is a prerequisite for the other aspects and should support all facets of community life” (2007, 7-8). Yet while NSNS (like all SNS) require specific technology, the technology alone does not guarantee their successful development. Rather NSNS, even more so than SNS, should be understood as social phenomena that facilitate social connections between people with common interests (Toral et al., 2009). Thus, while SNS are primarily organised around networks of people with the individual at the centre of their own community, NSNS are primarily focused on interests, activities or locations and upon grouping communities of people who share these interests and/or activities and/or locations. A vibrant SNS needs only networked members who are prepared to network with other members. A vibrant NSNS relies on a committed, passionate group of people at the heart of the community who regularly contribute content and commentary on the site.

Membership of a SNS and a NSNS is not mutually exclusive, with almost all users in our own study maintaining profiles across both. It may prove that people use SNS for more general communication amongst extended networks and turn to NSNS for more specified content within a network of engaged users sharing that particular area of interest. As a communication platform, NSNS are favourably positioned for the maintenance of networks built primarily around a common interest rather than through existing and established relationships, thus typifying the characteristics of ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). Granovetter hypothesised that ‘strong ties’ are those between trusted and close people or people in tightly associated social circles, and ‘weak ties’ are those that exist between acquaintances, colleagues, and peers. While many connections on SNS are made between people with existing *Strong Ties*, NSNS greatly increase the formation and maintenance of *weak ties*, providing users with greater access to information not circulating in the closely-knit networks of strong ties (Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009). This extends Donath and boyd’s (2004) hypothesis that SNS themselves (the interface and the technology) enable the establishment and preservation of weak ties between geographically or demographically dispersed individuals to be done both cheaply and easily. This is not to suggest that there is not any ‘offline’ element among connected individuals in NSNS. Indeed, all SNS users engage in ‘searching’ for people with whom they have an offline connection more than they ‘browse’ for complete strangers (boyd and Ellison, 2008, p.221). The particular point of distinction between NSNS and SNS that we engage with here is the increased likelihood of connecting with a stranger with whom you share a common interest when using an NSNS than SNS, as well as the implications of this insight for the NSNS business model.

A pivotal component of this research project was centred on understanding the dynamics of how online communities operate. Of particular interest was trying to decipher the specific characteristics and/or functions that determine which online

communities become successful, self-sustaining, highly productive and potentially commercial entities. However, understanding what makes online communities successful is quite complicated. Primarily, the success of the community depends on the number of actively contributing users. While the nomenclature differs between authors, a general pattern defining the following three key user profiles emerges in the research literature surrounding participation in online communities:

- ‘Marginal’, ‘Passive’, ‘Lurker’, and ‘Peripheral’ members occasionally and irregularly contribute new content or features to the site; exhibit some adherence to the core values and norms of the community
- ‘General’, ‘Active’, ‘Influential’ and ‘Inviter’ members make regular contributions to the community; often share opinions or make recommendations; have good adherence to the core values and norms of the community
- ‘Core’, ‘Leader’, ‘Linker’, and ‘Pollinator’ guide and coordinate the development of the community; participate in its social evolution; make significant and constructive contributions to the development and evolution of the technological platform; regularly and often share opinions about the community; make recommendations to the community; blog about interest categories with the community; develop, support, and guide core values and norms of the community.

(Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Xu et al., 2005; Kumar, Novak, & Tomkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Chandler, 2011)

Nonnecke and Preece (2000) suggest that the ratio in the user profiles outlined here is usually skewed towards ‘marginal’ members, and that online communities can expect 45-90 per cent non-contributing users. Obviously, the ability to attract new users to an SNS is significantly improved if there are already a number of users who contribute to the community (Toral et al., 2009). Thus, while the communicative nature of SNS seems to grant anyone the power to voice opinion, spread information, and produce user-generated content (UGC), research suggests that individual influence on community agendas is often a matter of degree. Bruns (2010) has argued that online communities are defined by the adherence of their members to a set of shared values and that leading or core community members best embody these shared values. A recent study (Chandler, 2011) identified five actions that determine a person's degree of influence online: sharing opinions about favourite subjects, making recommendations on products, trying products, posting in online forums and blogging about interest categories. Surveying 850 people who self nominated as ‘being passionate’ about a particular subject (e.g., fashion, finance, technology), the survey showed that ‘general members’ – in this case 45% of the survey population – regularly undertook two of the five actions, and community leaders – in this case 20% of the survey population regularly undertook all five actions (Chandler, 2011). It follows then that those members who read more, share more, influence more, and engage with other members more will set the community agenda within niche sites focusing on a single topic. And as niche communities develop norms, community standards and policies that determine appropriate content for their site and how regulatory protocols are to be enacted, consumers and participants or ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2008) continue to derive high value from site content as it is at once on-demand, more personalised, and *niche-specific*.

The businesses of Niche and Social Network Sites

While advertising remains core to the business of most commercial media, the conversational character of social network media highlights important changes occurring in the social contract between media proprietors and users (Spurgeon 2008, 108). No longer are mass audiences sold to advertisers in exchange for 'free' content. Social media users now exchange personal information for communication and content creation tools and services.

Commercial conversational media markets are highly volatile environments. Competition between Niche and Social Network Sites is fierce and the rapid movement of people into and out of SNS changes fortunes almost overnight. Facebook's claim to more than 800 million registered users – of which more than 50% log on daily (SkyNews, 2011) – lead to the SNS listing on the stock market on 17 May 2012 with a negotiated share price of \$US38 apiece, valuing the company at \$104 billion. The earlier experience of My Space also shows how the value of social media can just as quickly diminish. The rapid rise of Facebook certainly contributed to the demise of Myspace, which was the dominant social networking service as late as early 2008¹. The launch of competitors such as Twitter in 2006 and then Google+ in 2011 prompted some analysts to suggest that Facebook has matured with new registrations slowing from a monthly peak of 20 million new users in 2010 to 13.8 million new users in April 2011 and 11.8 million new users in May 2011, with most of that growth coming from Brazil, Thailand, Indonesia and Mexico (Armstrong, 2011). Decline in Facebook usage has been strongest amongst secondary school and university students (Sunday Business Post), many of whom now consider what was a fun and centralised destination for communicating with family and friends to be a time-consuming chore with obligatory updates, high account maintenance, poor usability and major concerns around privacy.

It can be argued that the emergence of SNS as a new locale for communication has delivered a new tool both of and for cultural identification. And when compared to SNS – where it is difficult to gain a sense of social composition and the common points of convergence (or not) between members – SNS may give rise to new, reflexively and collaboratively constructed notions of identity, culture and community through which people – particularly younger people – include and exclude themselves from particular forms of association. Certainly Facebook has had a central place in teens' lives (for example, Armstrong, 2011). However, as interests mature and become more specialized, young people may gravitate towards NSNS. And the more NSNS emerge to capture diverse and specified lifestyles and interests, the more these new 'channels' will compete with Facebook.

¹ Myspace was launched in 2003 and acquired by News Corp in 2005 for \$US580 million as a distribution outlet for Fox Studio content (News Corp, 2005). Myspace was the leading social networking site when News Corp attempted to merge it with Yahoo! in 2007, and was valued then at \$US12 billion. Yet in August 2008, membership on Facebook surpassed that of Myspace, and in the twelve-month period to March 2011 membership on Myspace had fallen from 95 million to 65 million unique registered users (Barnett, 2011). In February 2011 Myspace was estimated to be worth \$50-200 million (despite suffering a \$156 million loss during the last quarter of 2010) and News Corp offered the site for sale with a reserve price of \$100 million (Vascellaro and Adams, 2011). This reserve was not met, and on 29 June 2011 Myspace announced it had been sold to Specific Media and Justin Timberlake for \$US35 million (Fixmer, 2011).

Indeed, analysts also suggest that the proliferation of NSNS is eating into Facebook's user base and explains at least in part why it is that 6 million United States users and 1.52 million Canadian users left Facebook in May 2011, with losses also occurring in the United Kingdom and Norway (Eldon, 2011). Facebook is quick to dismiss suggestions that it is in decline, and there is certainly no evidence of a corresponding growth in NSNS. User habit and high non-economic exit costs (Humphreys 2007) may mean that people choose to remain with Facebook rather than managing multiple social networks. However, the drop in membership and decline in new registrations may signify an end to Facebook's 'growth phase', and the emergence of more stable usage patterns as social networking becomes normalised. The normalisation of SNS can also be seen in the manner in which Facebook has permeated the larger online economy, with big businesses launching Facebook pages and running competitions in order to connect directly with their customers, and smaller enterprises maintaining a Facebook profile in a manner similar to the way many non-online enterprises businesses sought an online web presence with a simple web site at the end of the 1990s. As business and advertisers scramble to carve a space for themselves on Facebook in order to be 'where the people are', the emergence of NSNS may lead them to conclude that bypassing Facebook in favour of a dedicated niche community puts them exactly where *their* people are.

The capacity of SNS to bring advertisers into direct contact with consumers is a crucial factor that explains the extraordinary commercial success of these new media. The conventional approach in advertising maintains the distinction between advertisers and consumers. Advertisers seek out niches. In SNS and NSNS this sender-receiver relation is broken down. Advertisers create social ads that allow users to display the goods and services they use, admire, rent or buy, thereby implicitly or explicitly recommending the same to their friends, and a self-selection of market niches. Given the highly targeted advertising capabilities, the effectiveness of SNS as advertising media is perplexing, especially when compared to other online media. Click through rates for advertising on social networks remain significantly lower than that of search engines, with only 4 per cent of retail online traffic in the U.S being driven by social network sites, in comparison to the 29 per cent for search engines (Seth, 2008). The difference here is fine-grained targeting which turns out to be far more effective in SNS. As a search engine, Google makes money from users passing through the site quickly, finding what they want and clicking on it. Facebook, on the other hand, relies on display advertising, and the more time (more) people spend on the site, the more money it makes. A rapid drop in interest would quickly kill Facebook's revenue stream. Despite these uncertainties, total global spending on advertising within social networks has continued to grow, rising from \$US2.53 billion in 2009, \$US3.3 billion in 2010, and \$US4.26 billion in 2011 (Emarketer 2010a) with spending on advertising in social networks accounted for 6.7 per cent of all online advertising in 2010 and 10.8 per cent in 2011 (Emarketer 2010a).

The attraction of NSNS for advertisers lies in their potential to develop niches that enable even finer-grained niche targeting than SNS. As advertising media, NSNS differ from SNS in the extent to which they facilitate more targeted like-minded social bonding and community building and by attracting specialist aficionados. One question that arises here is whether or not NSNS members (and which members – community leaders, creators, joiners, spectators) are more receptive to advertising within NSNS because the advertisements are more relevant to their particular

interests. Even if this is the case, NSNS confront other challenges. For example, developers cannot predict with any certainty the exact makeup of their developing community of users, or the nature or development costs of the communication tools that community will value, or the UGC that the communicative affordances of the NSNS will encourage, facilitate and enable. In the face of these unknowns an SNS such as Facebook is an effective, comparative risk minimisation strategy for advertisers, especially if they have no definitive context upon which to base their advertisements. It nonetheless seems that there is advertiser confidence in the ability of NSNS to extend the impact of social advertising and provide fast, reliable engagement and feedback that can be used by advertisers to directly shape and customise products and services for NSNS participants.

Staywild: an NSNS experiment

Staywild.com.au was developed as part of a larger Queensland University of Technology and Australian Smart Services Cooperative Research Centre initiative based on the experimentation of innovative community building through the development of a 'lightweight' NSNS using 'off the shelf' software and soliciting community contributions in all aspects of its operations. Partnered with Fairfax Digital (a subsidiary of Fairfax Media) the project was based on disruptive innovation to established online media practices, and emulated the notion of the 'bedroom/garage' based online start-up or 'skunkworks', with development of the NSNS occurring outside of and beyond the constraints of the usual parameters of the corporate news media environment: That is, rather than acquiring an existing community with established practices and norms or developing a service as an adjunct to existing print media the project sought to develop a community base of member/owners from scratch. The project also made use of publicly available open-source software as part of a process of encouraging news media organisations to think more generally along these lines. While the approach of the staywild.com.au project was to build the site from the bottom up, anyone interested in building a NSNS themselves will find suitable tools readily available online. For example, the NSNS platform developer Ning provides off-the-shelf and ready-to-use social network platforms for people wishing to start a NSNS yet who lack the technical expertise. In June 2011, Ning had 65 million monthly unique visitors globally on its platforms, and became home to 2 million new NSNS between February 2007 and January 2010 (ning.com), spanning topics from artists in Brooklyn, fans of Broadway, ninjas, retirees and politics.

The staywild.com.au project proceeded on the assumption that any particular niche community may be supported via a social network site. Initial opportunities identified for the 'Skunkworks' project included niches around politics, education, identity, music, arts, sport, and health and wellbeing. Drawing on work undertaken in 2010 by the Smart Services CRC New Media Services *Establishing Digital Communities* project, lead by Axel Bruns from QUT, adventure travel and tourism was identified as a suitable niche, particularly as it is an underserved market in terms of non-commercial media platforms.

Stage One of the project ran from October 2010 to September 2011. The principle focus of *Stage One* was to develop and launch the website platform. Building of the site commenced in late March, 2011 and the site entered an extensive 'in-house'

testing period between May and July 2011. The principle focus of *Stage One* was to develop and launch the website platform, and beta test it with users. *Stage Two* of the project was to commence in September 2011 and continue to October 2012, and was to focus on further marketing, building, developing and testing of the online community. Unfortunately, funding pledged for *Stage Two* was withdrawn in December 2011 due to a combination of factors, including refocusing expenditure during the economic downturn and a pooling of similar projects being undertaken under the Fairfax Digital banner. The site was indefinitely shelved and the integral research outlined for Stage Two did not commence. Consequently, this paper focuses on *Stage One*, which provided researchers with the valuable opportunity to conceptualise and develop a live NSNS laboratory, that enabled concurrent research to be undertaken around low-cost promotion, gamification, collaborative editing and content co-creation, sustainable community development and indicators of qualitative motivation and experience participation (Swift and Nitins, 2011).

The Staywild project offered an experimental research platform designed to test ideas and trends generated by both the community and the research team, and to analyse the impact of these ideas in the building of community in a predominantly self-sustaining user-driven environment. Following the construction and launch of the site, the evolution of Staywild's features and functions was to be based on community desires for selective add-ons, such as gamification tools and co-editing software.

The ability of a site like Staywild to succeed in a tough market meant that marketing of the site would need to highlight what was unique in our offering compared to other adventure travel sites. To this end, we identified that staywild.com.au offered:

- A niche social community platform for the sharing of content for an adventure travel community
- A target audience of all travellers (high end, backpacker, low budget) interested in creating and sharing their stories
- A global focus wherein the site would initially reflect Australian content intended for the global community
- User-ownership of site wherein all future development and community decisions would be guided by members, as would the setting and moderating of community standards
- The use of Creative Commons License for all user contributions by which all users retain ownership of their own content.

Findings

During the period September to November 2011 membership of staywild.com.au grew to 100. The makeup of this community aligned neatly with the work of Nonnecke and Preece (2000), outlined above, who suggest that online communities can expect 45-90% of users to be 'passive', 'lurkers' or otherwise non-contributing. Of the 100 registered members, 45% of users did not continue, in terms of content generation, beyond basic registration. (Of these 45, 2 went so far as to submit a profile picture beyond the default profile icon supplied via the CMS). The CMS enabled users to connect with or 'friend' other users, and of the 55 contributing users, connections between users averaged 4, from a high of 9 (for two users), to a total of 28 members who had no connections.

Through the 55 contributing members, the site was able to generate 80 unique articles (from 34 members) and 239 photographic images (from 23 members) with 13 members contributing both text and images. The average length of an article contributed to staywild.com.au was 215 words, from a low of 24 to a high of 905, and together the 80 articles generated 17500 words of unique content to the site. The content of each article remained 'on topic' in that the articles remained aligned with the aim of staywild.com.au to make available via a niche social community platform the sharing of stories around adventure travel. All of the articles were of a 'where I've been' and 'what I did' story nature, with the exception of one or two 'where should I go given these circumstances?' articles. Together, these articles also solicited 61 unique comments that averaged 22 words in length from simple one-word comments like 'wow!' to paragraph length comments offering additional information and further recommendations. The 239 photographic images contributed to staywild.com.au received an additional 22 unique comments, averaging at 6 words each. What is interesting about these comments, from a community of interest or a SNS perspective, is that the sentiment expressed in these comments to both text and image contributions was overwhelmingly supportive.

Of the 100 members recruited during the beta period of testing, 50 completed an online survey. In addition to questions concerning travel journalism in general (to be discussed in another publication) the survey sought deeper insight into user experience with the site, how the community engaged with niche and general social media, what specific sites and applications they used, and the reasons they contributed content. The following section offers a breakdown of the main results.

The demographics the survey returned show that 76% of survey respondents were born in Australia (with an additional 16% from an overseas country where English is the official language), 71% of respondents were female, 67% of respondents were aged 18-24, and 57.1% of respondents were currently undertaking undergraduate university studies. Aside from students (57.1%), the survey represented people employed in the professional and services industries (28.6%), the public service sector (14.3%), small business (4.1%) and trade (4.0%). No retirees or unemployed people completed the survey. The 25-39 (14%) and 40-54 (19%) year old age groups were also represented, however no persons aged over 55 completed the survey.

When asked about their general consumption of travel media, survey respondents preferred online publications (88%) followed by social media (85.1%) and television (78.3%). Rates of preference for print magazines (63.8%) and newspapers (60.9%) suggest a correspondence with research (ref?) charting the progression of younger consumers from print- to online-based journalism and/or media, to which travel journalism is not immune.

Putting aside social media for now, survey responses revealed travel forums, travel blogs, travel booking sites, and travel review sites as the foremost internet platforms used for travel-related purposes. While some respondents indicated that they check travel sites on a daily basis, the vast majority of survey respondents visited them on a less than monthly basis. This seemingly low level of use is indicative of the reasons nominated for using these sites: respondents visited travel-related sites for researching about new destinations (92.0%) and planning a trip (84.4%), followed closely by

travel booking sites (82.2%). Unsurprisingly, considering the stated reasons for using these sites, the highest level of interest in these websites came from people intending to travel (98%) and those currently travelling (92.1%). Taken together, these results highlight the important role UGC has regarding researching and developing travel itineraries².

When it came to survey respondents' current engagement with social media, Facebook and YouTube were, unsurprisingly, the most popular services, followed by Google+ and Twitter. Perhaps the only surprise was the notable unpopularity of Flickr amongst respondents, of whom 47.9% claimed to have never used the service. A 'more than once a day' frequency of use of 64.0% was recorded by Facebook, well above the 14.3%, 14.0%, 4.2% and 2.1% recorded for YouTube, Google+, Twitter and Flickr respectively. These results were shifted at the 'weekly' frequency of use, with YouTube recording 44.9% followed by Google+ (22.0%), Twitter (20.8%), Facebook (18.0%) and Flickr (2.1%). When queried about their reasons for using these social media sites, survey respondents nominated "staying in touch with family and friends" (84.0%) and "building and maintaining work-related networks" (34.7%) as primary reasons.

When asked about travel-related UGC, 66.0% of respondents claimed to have contributed a travel-related story/photograph/video online, and again, indicative of the nature and frequency of travel, indicated that they do so mostly on a 'less than monthly' (48.5%) or 'monthly' (21.2%) basis. Facebook (62.0%) was nominated as the destination mostly likely to receive such content, followed by users' personal blogs (24.4%), and Twitter, YouTube and TripAdvisor (each with 19.8%).

In terms of likely motivation for sharing travel-related content, 'promoting and sharing your future travel plans' (56.0%), 'to create a travel story with other travellers' (54.0%), 'to have a visible travel history' (52.0%), 'to receive feedback on your travel stories' (52.0%) and 'to have your travel story published' (44.0%) all rated highly, particularly when compared to 'royalties from published texts' (24%) and other non-monetary rewards (24.0%-14.0%). The cohort also indicated that they were far more likely to use social media to share a positive travel story (74.0%) than a negative travel story (58.0%).

² Schmallegger and Carson (2008) show that the increase in the number of websites dedicated to user generated tourism recommendations and ratings has had a significant impact on travel and tourism industries worldwide. UGC websites are estimated to have influenced "US\$10 billion a year in online travel bookings", with over 20% of consumers now solely relying on UGC sites when planning trips (2008: 100). Gretzel, Yoo and Purifoy (2007) surveyed 1480 people and found that 92% of respondents used the internet to plan trips by reading comments and materials posted by other consumers, 82.7% used the internet to download related travel maps and/or directions, 64.2% read travel-related blogs, and 59.9% used the internet to request printed materials and/or brochures. When it came to ratings and reviews, the survey showed 77.9% of respondents found online reviews "extremely or very important" for deciding where to stay, 33.6% for where to eat, 32.5% for what to do, 27% for where to go, and 26.6% for when to go.

Finally, an important finding for the research project was the indication that retaining ownership of contributed content through Creative Commons Licensing was, either very important (37.0%) or important (31.0%) to participants.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn upon the research experience of the Staywild ‘living laboratory’, as well as relevant literature, to canvas a range of factors that shape opportunities for the development of NSNS. The Staywild experiment showed that there is a demographic that is willing to participate in NSNS for altruistic reasons even as media and entertainment choices continue to specialize and proliferate, and despite high levels of uncertainty about the ongoing operation of the NSNS. Nonetheless, terms and conditions of NSNS use, particularly those relating to intellectual property rights of users, may figure as an important factor in shaping levels of NSNS user-engagement.

Interesting and important distinctions can be drawn between SNS and NSNS in terms of composition of user motivations with consequences for development and business strategies, including their different potential interests to advertisers. While entry barriers for SNS publishers are qualitatively different to material media, the risks of failure are considerable. So too are the rewards of success, as the public listing of Facebook in the midst of a major global economic downturn suggests. Nonetheless, despite the hallmarks of customization and personalization, SNS arguably rely upon ‘common denominator’ applications, including communication tools, to attract large populations of users in ways that echo mass media reliance upon common denominator programming. This contrasts with NSNS that develop more specialized applications of these tools in ways that attract, encourage and support the development of content that appeals to topic-based or demographic special-interest communities. Furthermore, as SNS mature it seems likely that more NSNS will find viable niches within which to operate. Although NSNS have smaller numbers of users, they are of higher value when aggregated into more highly specialized niches of shared interests. Although limited, the Staywild experiment nonetheless opens up at least two questions for further research: in what ways do users who are strangers to each other create value in an NSNS context? And, what influence do strangers exercise where there is a shared interest?

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